

Presentation given by Barclay Bell – Ulster Farmers Union President

Chair, Delegates, it is indeed my privilege to kick off our conference here today and on behalf of the Ulster Farmers Union, can I say very well done to Sinclair Mayne and his team for organising this event . In our current climate of political uncertainty, as an industry from primary producer, to processor, to retailer, to researchers, to the Agri- supply sector and to our NGO's, we have a responsibility to take up the challenge of how we can insure that our businesses are ready for change. While we are confused by political uncertainty and the direction of travel, one thing is very sure, changes and big changes are most definitely on their way for our industry.

The exact timelines of when this change might happen are perhaps still somewhat vague, is it 2020, is it 2022 or is it 2024? You can make up your own minds, but whichever year it is, there are none of them which are that far away. This is not a time for looking over your shoulder, that is not the direction of travel! As someone recently said to me if we only look at the past or present, we more than likely will miss the future

What will the family farm in Northern Ireland look like in 2030 and can we ensure the family farm will survive in a global context? People often say, "you know, the world has become a small place "and how right they are, and this brings new challenges. Inevitably we will see new trade deals, our competitors may be coming from a very low cost base, standards may differ, but we are going to have to compete in this global market, and we will have to accept that price volatility will probably be the norm. Will we need scale to survive or can we thrive if we can produce what the consumer really wants in a sustainable manner? Will we still be trading in commodities or will we have carved out high value markets?

We cannot afford just to do the same old thing and this is something of which we are very conscious in the Ulster Farmers Union. We want this industry to progress and we have been fully supportive in promoting animal health measures such as BVD eradication, we are fully engaged in trying to establish a genomics programme, our seeds and cereals committee have just agreed a new piece of research work looking at the usage of organic manures which should benefit both the arable and livestock sector, and I am also very encouraged that after our recent dairy conference which we held in conjunction with the Irish Farmers Journal that we now have a platform to look at the whole area of payment on milk solids. We have followed this up with AFBI and early indications are that this could be worth £43.88m to our dairy sector or perhaps a more meaningful figure, £12,434 per herd.

So going forward science, research and development is probably going to have an even more important role to play and how appropriate that today we

are looking at the whole area of Shaping Livestock Farming for 2030. As science and technology move at a phenomenal pace, it is critical that we have properly resourced facilities in Northern Ireland to enable our researchers to get on with this work and then, critically that this information is disseminated to the industry.

One of the main aims of any future agricultural policy will undoubtedly be increased productivity and research and development will be an important driver to achieve this goal. However as we go for growth it will have to be achieved in a manner which enhances our environmental sustainability. And this will be a major challenge for our industry, as we are currently experiencing around the whole issue of ammonia emissions with a lack of relevant research and sound scientific evidence. We desperately need that plan to be put in place and our industry will respond. A partnership between the researcher, the regulator, those whose responsibility it is to transfer that knowledge, and the farming sector. This is not a new idea, we have only to take a look at the work of the Greenhouse Gas Implementation Partnership and how they have delivered. Every small step taken will have a cumulative effect in delivering that environmental sustainability and at the same time allowing the industry to grow. I, we as farmers are hungry for this new knowledge and technology, but this can't happen if we don't have the science to support it. Our industry must be allowed to grow! And as the Going for Growth document stated, commission research into measurable, best practice systems for sustainable intensification on farm. The groundwork is complete, we have a 130 page document from the expert working group on sustainable land management, Delivering our Future, Valuing our Soils.

There is an opportunity here, we could become leaders in the field. While others talk the talk, we can and must deliver on promoting our sustainability through this hard, credible scientific evidence.

However, while sustainable intensification are the current buzz words, many other issues will help shape livestock farming through until 2030. Herd health and flock health have a major impact on farm profitability. As we talked to our members last year on future agricultural policy we were hearing loud and clear that perhaps some of the support measures should be geared towards individual farm animal health and welfare management plans. It seems to be the case as we eradicate one production disease there may well be another one round the corner which could be prevented. Yes, prevention is better than cure, and here again our farming industry wants to take up this challenge. Farmers can play a major role in ensuring the responsible use of antibiotics and other anti microbials, but key to this is that we will require the guiding principles.

So it isn't difficult to spot the common theme in all of these areas of future livestock production, we must have SCIENCE! Let's not leave our industry behind, producer and processor left clutching at straws, many game changing opportunities missed.

Perhaps we need to take some encouragement from the announcement a couple of weeks ago by Business Secretary Gregg Clarke of the £90m pot of money for an Agri-tech revolution within the Industrial Strategy. More detail is required but this may be a signal from Government of a new spirit of innovation. Hopefully this innovation can be translated from the lab to the field and help us achieve our target of an efficient, productive and environmentally sustainable industry.

But I have no doubt we are well placed here in Northern Ireland to drive this research on provided necessary funding is put in place. AFBI, the Institute for Global Food Security and of course AgriSearch have and will continue to deliver for the Agri-food business here in Northern Ireland. There is a myriad of issues which will confront us in the years ahead, never mind throwing into the mix a couple of more urgent issues. The Cheltenham Race Festival and The Grand Slam, next Saturday. But just like Ireland, our livestock sector will have to be at the top of their game, and just like Cheltenham, we may fancy a wee flutter, but there will be winners and losers. Let us make sure we are the winners, the stakes are high, we will need all the tools available which science can provide to stay ahead of the game!

We are all looking forward to an excellent conference and on behalf of the Ulster Farmers Union may I once again reiterate, we are up for change, our businesses cannot stagnate, they will need to grow, provide us with the science and we will play our part in developing farms fit for purpose and in Helping to Shape the Livestock Industry for 2030.