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HAVE YOUR SAY
Write to *Farmers Weekly*,
Quadrant House, The Quadrant,
Sutton, Surrey SM2 5AS
Telephone 020 8652 4911
Fax 020 8652 4006
Email farmers.weekly@rbi.co.uk

LETTERS OF THE WEEK

Flippant Flindt strayed off course on hunting

* Charlie Flindt's piece on retaining the Hunting Act, (Opinion, 23 October) while flippantly amusing on one level, belies some seriously flawed and complacent views.

First, there can be no justification for allowing any fundamentally bad and poorly drafted legislation to remain on the statute book whatever the effects, beneficial or otherwise.

No society should stand for such shoddy workmanship from its legislative bodies.

Forget fraudulent expenses claims, the legislators responsible for this work should be held to account and let's hope electors do exactly this at the election.

His argument to leave it on the statute book as an example to future policymakers is specious.

Second, the hunting world – employers, employees, suppliers, service-providers and the rural police – cannot be expected to continue under this cloud of legal uncertainty. It is unfair and untenable.

No electoral minority, social group nor commercial sector should be so discriminated against in this manifestly unjust manner. No police force should be put under such pressure to try to define what is right and wrong in the context of hunting.

Finally, what the rural minority and the countryside as a whole are crying out for is proper and responsible government.

Repeal of this Act would send a firm signal that an incoming government respects and understands this basic responsibility, something for which the Countryside Alliance has been campaigning.

The arguments for and against hunting will always rage. But the case for repeal of this pernicious act is overwhelming.

James Johnsen
Chairman, Dorset Countryside Alliance
Knighton, Sherborne

* While I can understand Charlie Flindt's view of the Hunting Act with regard to his land being used for illegal hare coursing, I strongly



The Hunting Act is "fundamentally bad and poorly drafted legislation".

disagree with his idea of keeping the Act intact (Opinion, 23 October).

He obviously has not thought about those poor hunt servants and other people who have been under the threat of prosecution over the last couple of years.

Every one of these prosecutions have either failed or been thrown out, but they should never have been brought in the first place.

As a hill farmer on the slopes of Exmoor I want the foxes and deer controlled in the proper,

safe and sensible way that was always the case before the Hunting Act became law. Believe me, this Act has made it worse for the quarry concerned, thanks to the additional indiscriminate shooting that has been taking place.

Luckily the Conservatives have fully committed themselves to a free vote to repeal this useless Act and I and most of the farmers in this country cannot wait for it to happen.

Loveday Miller
North Molton,
Devon

Benn must look at the whole picture

* I was interested to read DEFRA secretary Hilary Benn defending his government's record on agricultural production by selecting certain statistics (News, 23 October).

As Mr Benn knows it is important to look at the issue as a whole and not just by reference to a few sound-bites.

To do this he would do no better than to go to his own department's website and look at the Quick Statistics section, where changes in UK cropping area and livestock numbers are tracked from 1997 to 2008.

Rather conveniently, this period more or less overlaps with the duration of his government's current tenure. Every category listed, without exception, has seen a reduction.

I readily admit that whether his



government should be held responsible for this may be open to debate but, if the minister is serious about his claims to want to see British agriculture producing more, then he must also be accurate and honest about what has happened in the past 12 years.

Guy Smith
St Osyth, Essex

ELS flounders as computer says no

* Part of the solution to some of the problems the Rural Payments Agency is having with the re-mapping exercise could be simply resolved if Natural England made some modifications to its admin-

istrative system. The problem is that this has been known about for at least two years and nothing has been done about it.

The RPA re-mapping exercise is nothing new to me. Following an EU auditor's visit in 2007 we were extensively re-mapped and lost all our non-permanent boundaries. The result was several large land parcels shared with our neighbours – one of which is 112ha (276 acres) and has 21 land parcels occupied by 10 different claimants.

However, since creating master lists allocating single letters to growers for suffixes, and allocating areas, the single farm payment procedure has never been easier. There are no overlapping boundaries, white space between parcels,

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or over claims and we all got our money in good time. In this instance I thought the RPA had got it right, simplifying an area where we were all struggling to get boundaries agreed.

So imagine my annoyance at discovering my Entry Level Stewardship payments had stopped. Apparently Natural England's computer system cannot cope with fields divided and identified by suffixes. Although my payments resumed, the effect has been to exclude other growers from being able to make a claim.

The RPA has tried to find a workaround, by allowing growers to put in boundary markers, but with the number of boundaries I have, I find this unworkable and impractical as there would be too many, and the posts would always be in the way.

The effect of this is that I and other growers in regions where there are many non-permanent boundaries are probably not going to be able to apply for the ELS schemes, not because we don't want to do our bit for the environment, but because a computer cannot process our applications. Don't blame me for not wanting to do my bit!

Ian Backhouse
Chairman, NFU Combinable Crops Committee

Mycotoxin results are no surprise

* In response to the article "Growers slam 'excessive' mycotoxin rules" (News, October 23), we should not be surprised that an individual mycotoxin test threw up an odd high result. Even under ideal conditions the test is only at best accurate within a 40% margin – this range is considerably greater if not handled correctly.

HGCA research shows that, when competed correctly, the risk assessment is a better guide to DON than rapid tests. Second, we must be clear that our food safety authorities accept crop assurance as evidence of due diligence in managing risk and that there is in fact no legal requirement for farmers to have grain tested for pesticide residues, hydrocarbons or any other potential contaminants including mycotoxins.

If DON risk assessment comes out above 15 the crop is at risk

of exceeding the legal limit and a farmer should consult his customer about what further steps they would like taken before agreeing to accept the grain.

Guy Gagen
NFU chief arable adviser
Agriculture House
Warwickshire

Cash trumps qualifications

I note with interest the discussion about the skills shortage in the agricultural sector (News, 23 October).

Young entrants can be trained to the hilt – BSc Agric, BASIS, FACTS, and so on. But the one thing that will stop them getting a toehold in farming in their own right is hard cash, and lots of it.

It is a humbling experience going to a land agent's show stand, armed with all the qualifications you would need to run a successful farm business, only to find that the amount of capital you have to invest is 10% to 20% of what the agent needs to take you seriously. Before you know it you have been walked away from the cheese and wine and politely dispatched.

Tenant farms rarely come to the open market, as when a tenant farmer chooses to retire the land often goes to the neighbouring farmer who has the capital and resources to farm the land with the minimum fuss for all concerned. The house is made available as "Substantial farmhouse with two acres of land" and the buildings acquire "outline planning". The likelihood of the farm being run as a single unit again is remote.

Is this wrong? On one hand there is less diversity in agriculture, as larger farms are less suited to handle niche production. But in the cold light of day – the kind of cold light businesses such as Tesco use – we all like a deal.

It must be understood that it takes much more than qualifications and rural training for any potential entrant to farm in their own right. Cash is still king.

Harry Henderson
Scopwick, Lincolnshire

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talking point



Bryce Mackellar Young Farmers' Clubs chairman

We must encourage young farmers or lose them

The UK is not the only farming nation that needs young people to pick up the torch



As I am coming to the end of my NFYFC chairmanship I would like to congratulate *Farmers Weekly* on behalf of the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs for 75 years of loyal and outstanding commitment to the British farming industry.

But as the magazine celebrates the past three-quarters of a century, I'd like to look ahead and ask what the future holds for entrants to the industry. Are the opportunities really out there? I feel they are, but British agriculture, the public and the government must think about some key issues that worry me.

Along with many other benefits, our county council farm holdings provide an entry into farming, a vital opportunity for farmers that will be jeopardised if we don't work towards sustaining them.

As government and county council asset-stripping are on the agenda to cover spiralling debt, the county council farm estates are an obvious target. These holdings are vital for young people to get a start on the farming ladder, offering lower risks and opportunities to work with a limited cash investment.

But council holdings don't need to be the only opportunities of becoming your own farming boss. Young people should take advantage of all that the Fresh Start initiative offers by meeting like-minded people, improving their business skills or finding out how to get more training.

It will help them to look towards becoming a partner in an established farming business.

Another issue is something the older generation of farmers (and probably the current generation, too) needs to be looking at – advice on succession planning.

Have a succession plan as part of your farm business plan. It could offer a much-needed opportunity for future farmers, whether it's running the business, being a partner or renting land. Creating a future for a new entrant or younger farmer could also offer a welcome opportunity and a happy retirement.

There's still a bright future for young people in farming but will they all be farming in Britain?

This is my biggest worry because the UK is not the only country in the world that needs young blood to pick up the agricultural torch. Young people will take the opportunities in the nations offering the biggest incentives.

We have seen many farming organisations and *Farmers Weekly* promoting young people and the opportunities for them in British agriculture. And there's no doubt that there is still work to be done to persuade a wider audience of the opportunities of working in the sector.

But one thing that can be safely said is that any young person wanting to farm has literally got the world (not to mention the earth) at his or her feet.

Bryce Mackellar is chairman of the NFYFC